

Reification

In the central chapter of his *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', Georg Lukacs explicated the concept of reification. Lukacs drew insights from Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Ferdinand Tönnies about the trajectory of modernity into his emerging Marxist theory of revolutionary subjectivity. Marx made few explicit references to reification. For Marx, commodity fetishism is the form of alienation specific to bourgeois society. Commodities are qualitatively different objects that are exchanged through the medium of the money-commodity as if equivalent to each other. They appear as fantastic 'thing-like objects' possessing autonomous 'magical powers'. Social relations, as Marx put it, assume the form of 'material relations between persons, and social relations between things'. For Lukacs, the concept 'reification' expresses the structure of a society founded upon universal commodity exchange. Reification is 'only an illusion' but it is also a necessary one. Insofar as human functions are transformed into a commodity, self-objectification, atomization and estrangement are already presupposed by the abstract, quantitative mode of calculability of the commodity structure. Consciousness thus both reifies and is reified by the commodity structure. Lukacs' notion of reification undermines 'false consciousness' and ideology from their vaunted explanatory position within Western Marxism.